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SUBJECT: MUQTADA SADR DEBUTS ON AL-JAZEERA WITH  
IRAQI NATIONALIST MESSAGE, REJECTING "SECTARIAN" OR  
"OCCUPATION" FEDERALISM

REF: (A) OSC GMP20060218564004; (B) OSC GMP20060212522002

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Influential Iraqi politician Moqtada al-Sadr has emerged from relative media obscurity into the regional limelight with extensive travels and a remarkable interview on al-Jazeera on February 18. During a regional procession that included Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Syria and Jordan (and reportedly stops still planned for Egypt and Lebanon), he has repeatedly called for removal of "occupation" forces from Iraq and said the Sadr Trend has entered a phase of "political engagement" to effect this. He has called for national unity and rejected "sectarian federalism," and notes that the Mahdi Army has evolved from being a "military" to a "cultural" force, even while committing it to defend Iran or Syria if they are attacked. Sadr is praising Hamas and copying the rhetoric of some regional Islamists with promises of improved service to the people. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Iraqi politician and son of the influential late Ayatollah Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr made his debut on pan-Arab talk shows with a February 18 appearance on al-Jazeera's "Open Dialog" program with Ghassan bin Jiddu. The program was rebroadcast on February 19. (Ref A provides further readout).

¶3. (U) Sadr in many ways elaborated on themes he has repeated during regional visits that began with a visit to the funeral of the Kuwaiti Emir in January. Since then, he has visited Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria and Jordan. In both Iran and Syria, he created a stir with comments that the Mahdi Army would protect either of those states in the face of an external attack; he stressed the need for positive relations with both. (Ref B provides readout of the Syrian visit.)

Politics and Religion

¶4. (U) On Jazeera, Sadr said he does not accept secularism. However he drew a distinction between religion and politics. Religion, from God, must include all aspects of life, including politics. Politics, however, need not include religion. He reiterated his adherence to the guidance and rulings of Shia marja' Ayatollah Kadhim al-Ha'iri (who lives in Qum, Iran). He said the Al-Sadr Trend is not a political party and has no political leaders, only religious leaders who aim to establish an Islamic society, to spread Islam among people, not governments.

Sadr Role in Iraq

¶5. (U) In Syria (on February 13), and again in the Jazeera interview, Sadr outlined three phases of the "Sadrist" evolution: "peaceful resistance, to help Iraq get rid of

the occupation and establish security; military resistance repelling U.S. attacks in the south and the center; and now political resistance." He told Syrian TV that this resistance should lead to removal of the occupation or a timetable for withdrawal." He added "the U.S. brought democracy to the Middle East but God turned the tables and made the democratic process a weapon against the U.S., as was the case in Palestine and in Iraq."

¶6. (U) On Jazeera, he was questioned extensively on the role of the Sadr Trend in Iraqi politics. Sadr refused to be pinned down on whether he would be directing the (thirty-strong) Sadr Trend bloc in parliament. He said only that Sadrists would represent the people, not a group or person, and their votes would be determined by the needs of the people. He admitted that the Trend had joined the United Iraqi Coalition (Shia bloc, or UIC), but said Sadr trend parliamentarians "will serve all sides, including Turkmen, Kurds, Sunnis, and Shabak."

¶7. (U) Pressed again on the issue of the UIC's "clearly Shia trappings," Sadr said his bloc would represent anyone "who seeks an independent and stable Iraq." Indeed, he noted the Sadr Trend would work with anyone but Saddamists and Takfiris. Sadr confirmed he was talking to Iraqi Sunni political entities (in Jordan, as there was no place in Iraq where the two could safely meet) and advising them to press two key demands: a just trial of Saddam, and withdrawal of foreign forces. He lumped Saddamists and Takfiris in with the occupation forces and said the latter "wield a fictitious Zargawi like a knife or a pistol" as a tool to blame others (Saddmists and takfiris) for crimes they commit themselves.

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Sadr vs. SCIRI  
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¶8. (U) Sadr told bin Jiddu that his supporters in the UIC voted for [Islamic Da'wa Party] candidate al-Ja'aferi as Prime Minister because Ja'aferi had been responsive to popular demands to release Sadr Trend detainees. "We are closer to Ja'aferi in addressing popular concerns than to SCIRI nominee Adel Abdul-Mahdi." (NOTE: Although Sadr never mentioned SCIRI leader Abdul-Aziz al-Hakim, one Iraqi Sunni contact, addressing the Sadr support for Ja'aferi, told PAS Media Advisor on February 18 that the "clerical rivalry between the Hakims and Sadrs is deep and historic, yet rarely addressed publicly."

Mehdi Army  
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¶9. (U) Sadr calmly deflected the attempt to put him on the defensive over the Mahdi Army, or Jaish al-Mahdi. He said that the Jaish al-Mahdi serves the Iraqi people; at one point, it was a military force, but now it is a cultural entity. It had earned the respect of many Iraqis for resisting Saddam in the first intifada; Ayatollah Sistani had cautioned against its disarmament.

Sadr the Public Servant  
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¶10. (U) Sadr repeated comments he made soon after government formation negotiations began in January, that he does not seek any "sovereign" ministries, but prefers to occupy the posts of "service" ministries. On Jazeera he specifically mentioned his desire for Sadr Trend to fill the ministry of electricity.

Occupation  
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¶11. (U) On Syrian TV, Sadr remarked that "the presence of

occupiers exacerbates the situation and leads to bloodshed. At the beginning the occupiers were targeted but now the targets are the Iraqi people, their shrines, land, and resources." He says one purpose of his regional tour is to seek support for the withdrawal of foreign forces from Iraq."

We Won't Accept any Foreign "Occupiers"

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¶12. (U) When asked on Jazeera about a possible plan for Arab or Muslim countries to replace troops now in Iraq, Sadr says that is not acceptable, he'd be the first to oppose it. He adds that when Najaf was under siege (in April 2004), no Arabs or Muslims came to their rescue.

¶13. (U) He notes a double standard in U.S. statements, calling Syrians occupiers of Lebanon, while the U.S. occupies Iraq. Even President Bush said he would resist occupation by foreigners. Sadr told Syrian TV "the United States is targeting Islam, the Islamic and Arab states in the Middle East and beyond. It wants to control the world. It started war in Iraq . . . then started problems with Syria, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. It started a problem with the Islamic Republic of Iran. These are pretexts to occupy them [politically] because it cannot occupy them militarily."

¶14. (U) He told Syrian TV that "occupiers say that the Iraqi Army and Police must be prepared to run the country. . . but they [don't] provide weapons, funds, or equipment." He repeated the gist of this critique on Jazeera.

Federalism and the Constitution

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¶15. Sadr told Jazeera that federalism per se is accepted in Islam, but not if it is carried out under occupation or if it promotes sectarianism. Sectarian federalism he claims, will: 1) create fear of division; 2) be exploited as foreigners intervene; 3) lead to friction or conflict between regions; 4) cause divisions between Shia and Sunnis, Kurds and Arabs, not to mention other minorities. This would be a mistake, he adds.

Kirkuk

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¶16. (U) Addressing the Kurds' demands for distinct regions, he said "the Kurds had a fear of dictatorship. But if the occupiers leave, there will be real democracy and freedom, and then there is no need for regions." Sadr says he opposes establishment of a southern province. (NOTE: This is a keen interest of SCIRI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim.) He dismissed Kurdish claims to Kirkuk, saying "if Kurds, Shia, and Sunni are all Iraqis, Kirkuk is also an Iraqi city." He says that people are only focusing on it for its oil.

¶17. (U) Asked about the constitutional provision that allows Kirkuk to decide its own future by census, Sadr says this is not feasible. "Then Kirkuk would also have to be 'federalized' with an area for Shia, one for Sunnis, one for Kurds, one for Turkmen. Instead, Kirkuk or Kirkuk province should be part of a unified Iraq. Its wealth, its benefits, must be shared by all. We must fight sectarianism inside Kirkuk. If the constitution calls for a sectarian solution to Kirkuk, I reject it. Kirkuk should promote peaceful existence among all Iraqis."

Praise for Hamas

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¶18. (U) In the February 13 interview in Damascus, Sadr was

asked about his meeting with the Palestinian groups there and replied "we want to help these forces stand against attacks aimed at Islamic and Arab states, whether in Syria, Iraq, or Iran." He expressed hope that "political transformations in Palestine will be a prelude to ending occupation in Palestine and Iraq."

Saddam Trial  
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¶19. (U) On February 19, Sadr told Jazeera that the new presiding judge in the Saddam trial is preferable to Judge Rizgar Amin. He elaborated on the crimes and mass graves that are Saddam's legacy, and gave a "personal opinion" that Saddam deserved the death sentence.

Comment  
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¶20. (U) Sadr is a media anomaly in Iraq. He is associated with at least one newspaper, al-Hawza al-Natiq. (NOTE: The paper is named the "Vocal Hawza" to distinguish it from the quietist Hawza clerical tradition of Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani). Incitement in Hawza al-Natiq prompted the coalition to close down the latter in April 2004, sparking clashes between the Mahdi Army and the U.S. in Najaf. (NOTE: The paper is randomly available in Baghdad now.) Sadr has rarely taken to the airwaves; his relative silence to date contrasted starkly with Iraq's political "stars" (Ja'aferi, Hakim, Barzani, Talabani), all of whom fund their own TV stations. (Allawi has gotten airtime from the privately funded al-Sharqiya TV and terrestrial channel al-Rashid, owned by Sunni politician Sa'ad al-Janabi, and he finances "Baghdad" newspaper. He often directed programming of the public broadcaster as Prime Minister.)

¶21. (SBU) Some contacts in the media speculate that Sadr was being manipulated by others and afraid of being caught short on camera. They relate that Moqtada was only a child when his father and two older brothers -- both noted clerics -- were killed. His credentials are shrouded in mystery. One contact told us he had studied at Hawza and earned the "intermediary" clerical title of Hojjat-al-Islam, others say he avoided Hawza and remained aloof, playing video games that earned him the nickname "Moqtada Atari." Others say he disdains the media as un-Islamic, but this seems unlikely. Still others say he does not need TV when he controls influential mosques in the holy city of Najaf, Kut, Baghdad, Samawwa, Kerbala and Basra. Indeed, a contact from Najaf who started an independent TV station in 2003 told us in February that Sadr controls the city through mosques and the Mahdi Army to a degree that astonishes apolitical residents.

¶22. (SBU) In any event, camera-shy Moqtada is now a thing of the past. As evidenced in his extensive interviews in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, Syria, Jordan, and now regional kingpin al-Jazeera, Sadr has received coaching. In past public appearances he glowered at the camera with head bent and seemed immature. On Jazeera, seated in Grandma Moses profile, facing the anchor against a Zen-like backdrop of

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artistically arranged branches, he was at ease and quite confident.

¶23. (SBU) Iraqi contacts who resent Sadr's ability to mobilize the Mahdi Army against Iraq's "silent majority," commented on the transformation. Sadr drew some jibes from our staff who noted an extensive use of "habibi" (a common term of endearment), which they said betrayed his non-clerical schooling. And while he did not shake his youthful, pudgy and faux-cleric image, he struck at least three chords with this appearance among several Iraqis we polled: a pledge to address the electricity shortage, a pledge to serve all Iraqis, even Kurds (a rarity among Arab politicians), and a pledge to keep Iraq united. We suspect

his resonance among the poorest Iraqis was even deeper.

¶24. (SBU) He has not, however, presented any detailed plans on how he would address these issues. His cagey language on Islam and politics may have been a clever intent to draw in non-Islamist Shia. His tour in itself projects solidarity with Sunni Arab nationalists who are barely grappling with the concept of a Shia Iraq (no other Iraqi politician has conducted such an expansive regional tour). Certainly, taking his case to the huge regional audience on Jazeera while Sistani remains enveloped in the quietist cocoon of Najaf has now put Sadr fully on the map as the "Hawza al-Natiq." Judging by comments of most media contacts, many unhappy with this new TV image, Sadr also gained stature by engaging in "summits" with regional leaders while his cohorts back home remain mired in sordid bickering over cabinet slots.